

Classic Poetry Series

Gelett Burgess
- poems -

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Gelett Burgess(30 January 1866 – 18 September 1951)

Frank Gelett Burgess was an artist, art critic, poet, author and humorist. An important figure in the San Francisco Bay Area literary renaissance of the 1890s, particularly through his iconoclastic little magazine, *The Lark*, he is best known as a writer of nonsense verse. He was the author of the popular *Goops* books, and he invented the blurb.

Early life

Born in Boston, Burgess was "raised among staid, conservative New England gentry". He attended the Massachusetts Institute of Technology graduating with a B.S. in 1887. After graduation, Burgess fled conservative Boston for the livelier bohemia of San Francisco, where he took a job working as a draftsman for the Southern Pacific Railroad. In 1891, he was hired by the University of California at Berkeley as an instructor of topographical drawing.

Cogswell fountain incident

In 1894, Burgess lost his job at Berkeley as a result of his involvement in an attack on one of San Francisco's three Cogswell fountains, free water fountains named after the pro-temperance advocate Henry Cogswell who had donated them to the city in 1883. As the *San Francisco Call* noted a year before the incident, Cogswell's message, combined with his enormous image, irritated many:

It is supposed to convey a lesson on temperance, as the doctor stands proudly on the pedestal, with his whiskers flung to the rippling breezes. In his right hand he holds a temperance pledge rolled up like a sausage, and the other used to contain a goblet overflowing with heaven's own nectar. But wicked boys shattered the emblem of teetotalism with their pea-shooters and now the doctor's heart is heavy within him."

In response, numerous acts of minor vandalism had been inflicted upon the fountain.

Four iron posts with ornate lamps at the top originally graced the corners of this gurgling example of temperance, but now they lean and lurch and pitch like a drunken quadrille. Beer wagons heavy laden humped into the posts, shattered the stained-glass lamps and destroyed their equilibrium. Some of the lamps are canted over like a tipsy man's hat, and the whole group presents a most

convivial aspect."

The toppling incident took place in the early hours of January 1, 1894. As the Call reported,

Some iconoclastic spirits, probably made bold by too freely indulging in the convivialities of New Year's day, found vent for their destructive proclivities in the small hours of the morning yesterday. With the greatest deliberation, apparently, a rope was coiled around the mock presentment of Dr. Cogswell and with a strong pull, and all together, he was toppled from his fountain pedestal at the Junction of California and Market streets.

The newspaper noted that "no one professes to have knowledge of the perpetrators of the outrage," and no arrests had been, or were, made. However, Burgess's involvement was suspected and is generally viewed as the reason for his resignation from the university, reported by the Call on March 10, 1894, with the note that the resignation was "to take effect with the close of the year."

Burgess is now held in high regard at the University of California, Berkeley as a former professor and literary talent. A selection of his original works are housed in the Bancroft Library on the Berkeley campus.

The Lark and its descendants

Burgess's departure from the University became an opportunity to reconsider his professional aspirations. With a group of like-minded associates, he founded in 1895 a humorous little magazine entitled The Lark.

The Lark began as a lark, but was more successful than its makers intended, eventually reaching a circulation of over 3,000. Before the official publication date, local publisher/bookseller William Doxey, intrigued by the first number, agreed to act as official publisher of the venture. Volume 1, number 1 of the 16-page monthly appeared on May Day: May 1, 1895.

The original "Purple Cow," from 1895

I never saw a purple cow
I never hope to see one;
But I can tell you, anyhow,
I'd rather see than be one!

"The Purple Cow" (the full title was "The Purple Cow: Reflections on a Mythic Beast Who's Quite Remarkable, at Least"), an illustrated four-line poem that

appeared in the first number of *The Lark*, was to remain the ne plus ultra of nonsense verse that Burgess would spend his life unsuccessfully attempting to surpass.

At first, the magazine was edited and written primarily by Burgess, who took great delight in creating pseudonyms for himself. For example, in volume 1, four of the other "authors" are Burgess writing under different names.

Burgess was initially assisted by writer/artist Bruce Porter. The magazine soon attracted an eclectic group of contributors, who became known as "Les jeunes." These included Porter Garnett (who also took on editorial responsibilities as well), Carolyn Wells, Willis Polk, Yone Noguchi, and others. Local artists, including Ernest Peixotto, Florence Lundborg and Maynard Dixon contributed illustrations and cover designs.

By this point, Burgess had become thoroughly sick of "The Purple Cow," and wrote the following "Confession: and a Portrait Too, Upon a Background that I Rue" in *The Lark*, number 24 (April 1, 1897).

*Ah, yes, I wrote the "Purple Cow"—
I'm Sorry, now, I wrote it;
But I can tell you Anyhow
I'll Kill you if you Quote it!*

"Purple Cow" has since been used as a brand name.

Number 24 of *The Lark* (April 1897) was declared to be the last, but a final *Epilark* was issued in May. Subsequently, Burgess and publisher William Doxey recycled Burgess's contributions in such productions as *The Purple Cow* (1899) and *The Lark Almanack* (1899)

Burgess followed *The Lark* with another *Lark* spinoff, a peculiar magazine advertised in *The Lark's* sixth number entitled *Le Petit Journal des Refusées*. Said to be composed entirely of material rejected by other magazines, *Le Petit Journal des Refusées* was printed on discarded wallpaper scraps of irregular shape.

Marriage

Burgess married Estelle Loomis in 1914. A writer in her own right, Estelle Loomis worked on a number of literary projects throughout her marriage with Burgess; the two conferring together on each others' work. A beauty contest winner, according to the *Scranton Times* in September 1920, "Scranton woman second place in NY World beauty contest, Mrs. Gelett Burgess, Riverside Drive, NY,

formerly Miss Estelle Loomis, daughter of the late F. E. Loomis, attorney."

Burgess and Loomis were married until her death in 1946, however the years were wrought with continuous illness, fatigue, and complaints of various symptoms by Loomis.

The Goops and other works

Burgess wrote and illustrated several children's books about the habits of strange, baldheaded, idiosyncratic child-like creatures he called the Goops. He created the syndicated comic strip Goops in 1924 and worked on it to its end in 1925.

Of Queen Anne architecture he wrote:

<i>It should have a conical corner tower; it should be built of at least three incongruous materials or, better, imitations thereof; it should have its window openings absolutely haphazard; it should represent parts of every known and unknown order of architecture; it should be so plastered with ornament as to conceal the theory of its construction. It should be a restless, uncertain, frightful collection of details giving the effect of a nightmare about to explode.</i>

An influential article by Burgess, "The Wild Men of Paris", was the first introduction of cubist art in the United States. The article was drawn from interviews with Henri Matisse, Pablo Picasso, and Georges Braque.

His books *The Maxims of Methuselah* and *The Maxims of Noah* were illustrated by Louis D. Fancher.

Burgess founded the San Francisco Boys' Club Association, now the Boys & Girls Clubs of San Francisco, in 1891. The Club was the first of its kind west of the Mississippi River.

Legacy

The word "blurb", meaning a short description of a book, film, or other product written for promotional purposes, was coined by Burgess in 1907, in attributing the cover copy of his book, *Are You a Bromide?*, to a Miss Belinda Blurb. His definition of "blurb" is "a flamboyant advertisement; an inspired testimonial".

The Guinness Book of World Records lists his collection of synonyms for the word "drunken".

He also coined the phrase, "Love is only chatter; friends are all that matter."

The Gelett Burgess Center for Creative Expression was formed in Burgess's name in December 2011 to promote "family-friendly books" to parents and educators. Annually, the Gelett Burgess Children's Book Award is given in his honor to the top children's books of the year.

A Woman's Reason

I'm Sure every Word that you say is Absurd;
I Say it's All Gummidge and Twaddle;
You may Argue away till the 19th of May,
But I don't like the Sound of the Moddle!

Gelett Burgess

Abstemia

In Mystic

Argot

often Confounded with Farrago

If aught that stumbles in my speech
Or stutters in my pen,
Or, claiming tribute, each to each,
Rise, not to fall again,
Let something lowlier far, for me,
Through evanescent shades--
Than which my spirit might not be
Nourished in fitful ecstasy
Not less to know but more to see
Where that great Bliss pervades.

Gelett Burgess

Abstrosophy

If echoes from the fitful past
Could rise to mental view,
Would all their fancied radiance last
Or would some odors from the blast,
Untouched by Time, accrue?

Is present pain a future bliss,
Or is it something worse?
For instance, take a case like this:
Is fancied kick a real kiss,
Or rather the reverse?

Is plenitude of passion palled
By poverty of scorn?
Does Fiction mend where Fact has mauled?
Has Death its wisest victims called
When idiots are born?

Gelett Burgess

An Alphabet Of Famous Goops

AN ALPHABET OF FAMOUS GOOPS.

Which you 'll Regard with Yells and Whoops.

Futile Acumen!

For you Yourselves are Doubtless Dupes

Of Failings Such as Mar these Groups --

We all are Human!

- 1 ABEDNEGO was Meek and Mild; he Softly Spoke, he Sweetly Smiled.
- 2 He never Called his Playmates Names, and he was Good in Running Games;
- 3 But he was Often in Disgrace because he had a Dirty Face!

- 4 BOHUNKUS would Take Off his Hat, and Bow and Smile, and Things like That.
- 5 His Face and Hair were Always Neat, and when he Played he did not Cheat;
- 6 But Oh! what Awful Words he Said, when it was Time to Go to Bed!

- 7 The Gentle CEPHAS tried his Best to Please his Friends with Merry Jest;
- 8 He tried to Help Them, when he Could, for CEPHAS, he was Very Good;
- 9 And Yet -- They Say he Used to Cry, and Once or Twice he Told a Lie!

- 10 DANIEL and DAGO were a Pair who Acted Kindly Everywhere;
- 11 They studied Hard, as Good as Gold, they Always did as They were Told;
- 12 They Never Put on Silly Airs, but They Took Things that were Not Theirs.

- 13 EZEKIEL, so his Parents said, just Simply Loved to Go to Bed;
- 14 He was as Quiet as could Be whenever there were Folks to Tea;
- 15 And yet, he had a Little Way of Grumbling, when he should Obey.

- 16 When FESTUS was but Four Years Old his Parents Seldom had to Scold;
- 17 They never Called him 'FESTUS DON'T!' he Never Whined and said 'I Won't!'
- 18 Yet it was Sad to See him Dine. His Table Manners were Not Fine.

- 19 GAMALIEL took Peculiar Pride in Making Others Satisfied.
- 20 One Time I asked him for his Head. 'Why, Certainly! GAMALIEL Said.
- 21 He was Too Generous, in Fact. But Bravery he Wholly Lacked.

- 22 HAZAEL was (at Least he Said he Was) Exceedingly Well Bred;
- 23 Forbidden Sweets he would not Touch, though he might Want them very Much.

24 But Oh, Imagination Fails to quite Describe his Finger Nails!

25 How Interesting ISAAC Seemed! He never Fibbed, he Seldom Screamed;
26 His Company was Quite a Treat to all the Children on the Street;
27 But Nurse has Told me of his Wrath when he was Made to Take a Bath!

28 Oh, Think of JONAH when you 're Bad; Think what a Happy Way he had
29 Of Saying 'Thank You! -- 'If you Please' -- 'Excuse Me, Sir,' and Words like
These.
30 Still, he was Human, like Us All. His Muddy Footprints Tracked the Hall.

31 Just fancy KADESH for a Name! Yet he was Clever All the Same;
32 He knew Arithmetic, at Four, as Well as Boys of Nine or More!
33 But I Prefer far Duller Boys, who do Not Make such Awful Noise!

34 Oh, Laugh at LABAN, if you Will, but he was Brave when he was Ill.
35 When he was Ill, he was so Brave he Swallowed All his Mother Gave!
36 But Somehow, She could never Tell why he was Worse when he was Well!

37 If MICAH's Mother Told him 'No' he Made but Little of his Woe;
38 He Always Answered, 'Yes, I'll Try!' for MICAH Thought it Wrong to Cry.
39 Yet he was Always Asking Questions and Making quite Ill-timed Suggestions.

40 I Fancy NICODEMUS Knew as Much as I, or even You;
41 He was Too Careful, I am Sure, to Scratch or Soil the Furniture;
42 He never Squirmed, he never Squalled; he Never Came when he was Called!

43 Some think that OBADIAH'S Charm was that he Never Tried to Harm
44 Dumb Animals in any Way, though Some are Cruel when they Play.
45 But though he was so Sweet and Kind, his Mother found him Slow to Mind.

46 When PELEG had a Penny Earned, to Share it with his Friends he Yearned.
47 And if he Bought a Juicy Fig, his Sister's Half was Very Big!
48 Had he not Hated to Forgive, he would have been Too Good to Live!

49 When QUARTO'S brother QUARTO Hit, was QUARTO Angry? Not a Bit!
50 He Called the Blow a Little Joke, and so Affectionately Spoke,
51 That Everybody Loved the Lad. Yet Oh, What Selfish Ways he had!

52 Was REUBEN Happy? I should Say! He laughed and Sang the Livelong Day.
53 He Made his Mother Smile with Joy to See her Sunny-Tempered Boy.
54 However, she was Not so Gay when REUB Refused to Stop his Play!

55 When SHADRACH Cared to be Polite, they Called him Gentlemanly, Quite;
56 His Manners were Correct and Nice; he Never Asked for Jelly Twice!
57 Still, when he Tried to Misbehave, O, how Much Trouble SHADRACH Gave!

58 Don't Think that TIMOTHY was Ill because he Sometimes Kept so Still.
59 He knew his Mother Did Not Care to Hear him Talking Everywhere.
60 He did not Tease, he did Not Cry, but he was Always Asking 'WHY?'

61 URIAH Never Licked his Knife, nor Sucked his Fingers, in his Life.
62 He Never Reached, to Help Himself, the Sugar Bowl upon the Shelf.
63 He Never Popped his Cherry Pits; but he had Horrid Sulky Fits!

64 To See young VIVIUS at his Work, you Knew he 'd Never Try to Shirk.
65 The Most Unpleasant Things he 'd Do, if but his Mother Asked him To.
66 But when young Vivius Grew Big, it Seems he was a Norful Prig!

67 Why WABAN always Seemed so Sweet, was that he Kept so Clean and Neat.
68 He never Smooched his Face with Coal, his Picture Books were Fresh and Whole.
69 He washed His Hands Ten Times a Day; but, Oh, what Horrid Words he 'd Say!

70 What shall I say of XENOGOR, Save that he Always Shut the Door!
71 He always Put his Toys Away when he had Finished with his Play.
72 But here his List of Virtues Ends. A Tattle-Tale does not Make Friends.

73 YERO was Noted for the Way with which he Helped his Comrades Play;
74 He 'd Lend his Cart, he 'd Lend his Ball, his Marbles, and his Tops and All!
75 And Yet (I Doubt if you' ll Believe), he Wiped his Nose upon his Sleeve!

76 The Zealous ZIBEON was Such as Casual Callers Flatter Much.
77 His Maiden Aunts would Say, with Glee, 'How Good, how Pure, how Dear is He!'
78 And Yet, he Drove his Mother Crazy -- he was so Slow, he was so Lazy!

Gelett Burgess

I'D Rather Have Habits Than Clothes

I'd Rather Have Habits Than Clothes,
For that's where my intellect shows.
And as for my hair,
Do you think I should care
To comb it at night with my toes?

I'd rather have ears than a nose,
I'd rather have fingers than toes,
But as for my hair:
I'm glad it's all there;
I'll be awfully sad when it goes.

I wish that my Room had a Floor;
I don't so much care for a Door,
But this walking around
Without touching the ground
Is getting to be quite a bore!

Gelett Burgess

My Feet

My Feet they haul me Round the House,
They Hoist me up the Stairs;
I only have to Steer them, and
They Ride me Everywheres!

Gelett Burgess

Nonsense Verses

1

THE Window has Four little Panes:
But One have I;
The Window-Panes are in its sash,—
I wonder why!

2

My Feet they haul me 'round the House:
They hoist me up the Stairs;
I only have to steer them and
They ride me everywheres.

3

Remarkable truly, is Art!
See—Elliptical wheels on a Cart!
It looks very fair
In the Picture up there;
But imagine the Ride when you start!

4

[Pg 58]I'd rather have fingers than Toes;
I'd rather have Ears than a Nose:
And as for my hair,
I'm glad it's all there,
I'll be awfully sad when it goes!

5

I wish that my Room had a floor;
I don't so much care for a Door,
But this walking around
Without touching the ground
Is getting to be quite a bore!

On Digital Extremities

I'd Rather have Fingers than Toes;
I'd Rather have Ears than a Nose;
And As for my Hair,
I'm Glad it's All There;
I'll be Awfully Sad, when it Goes!

Gelett Burgess

Psycholophon

Twine then the rays
Round her soft Theban tissues.
All will be as She says,
When the dead Past reissues.
Matters not what nor where,
Hark, to the moon's dim cluster!
How was her heavy hair
Lithe as a feather-duster!
Matters not when nor whence;
Flittertigibbet!
Sound make the song, not sense,
Thus I inhibit!

Gelett Burgess

Table Manners

THE Goops they lick their fingers,
And the Goops they lick their knives;
They spill their broth on the tablecloth-
Oh, they lead disgusting lives!
The Goops they talk while eating,
And loud and fast they chew;
And that is why I'm glad that I
Am not a Goop-are you?

Gelett Burgess

The Floorless Room

I Wish that my Room had a Floor!
I don't so Much Care for a Door,
 But this Crawling Around
 Without Touching the Ground
Is Getting to be Quite a Bore!

Gelett Burgess

The Goops

The meanest trick I ever knew
Was one I know you never do.
I saw a Goop once try to do it,
And there was nothing funny to it.
He pulled a chair from under me
As I was sitting down; but he
Was sent to bed, and rightly, too.
It was a horrid thing to do!

Gelett Burgess

The Lazy Roof

The Roof it has a Lazy Time
A-Lying in the Sun;
The Walls, they have to Hold Him Up;
They do Not Have Much Fu

Gelett Burgess

The Purple Cow

I never saw a Purple Cow,
I never hope to see one,
But I can tell you, anyhow,
I'd rather see than be one!

Gelett Burgess

The Purple Cow: Suite

Ah, Yes! I Wrote the 'Purple Cow' -
I'm Sorry, now, I Wrote it!
But I can Tell you Anyhow,
I'll Kill you if you Quote it!

Gelett Burgess